

Wonder how tomorrow could ever follow today by ohmybgosh

Series: [this could be the place](#) [10]

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Summary:

Billy and Max go for a drive

Wonder how tomorrow could ever follow today

Author's Note:

Title is from "Going to California" by Led Zeppelin

"Don't call me that." His voice surprised himself; it was barely a whisper, crackly. He hadn't meant to speak.

The Hargrove kitchen went quiet.

Neil paused, his fork poised in the air on the way to his mouth. He set his paper down, his movements dangerously deliberate. He turned to Billy.

"Excuse me?"

The silence in the room settled like a suffocating blanket in the middle of winter, static crackling in the air with energy. Susan had finally looked up, she stared at Neil with her eyes wide. Billy's throat felt dry. His pulse was thrumming in his ears. The kitchen clock was the only sound that broke the silence.

Tick. Max looked at Billy, tears in her eyes. *Tick.* She glanced at Neil. *Tick.* Back to Billy.

Tick.

"Don't call me that." Billy's voice still shook, but it was louder, more sure.

Neil stood up.

Tick.

"Faggot," he spat.

He started forward. Billy's whole body shook. He fought back the urge to run. His father stopped in front of him and Billy set his jaw.

The smack echoed through the walls of the silent house. Billy's head

jerked to the side with the force. He turned back, ready, and the next one came.

His father shoved him back. He hit the wall. A picture frame fell to the floor on impact. The glass shattered. His father punched him in the stomach. Billy bent over, gasping. Blood trickled down from his nose, falling on the frame, seeping through the broken glass and blotting baby Billy's black and white toothless smile.

Tick.

He heard Neil suck in a breath. Billy closed his eyes, bracing himself.

“Stop!”

He heard Neil turn. Billy looked up, tasted blood in his mouth.

Max had stood. She was shaking from head to foot, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Please stop,” she choked.

Susan reached for Max's hand. Max jerked out of her reach.

Neil breathed deeply, his nostrils flaring. He straightened, smoothing his blood spattered hands down his shirt. He sat carefully back down at the table, picking up his paper as if nothing had ever happened.

Susan stared and Max stood stock still apart from the shaking.

Tick.

Billy bolted.

The front door swung shut behind him and he pitched forward, crouched down on the lawn. He gasped, a sob racking his throat. Hot tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, rolling down his cheeks and mixing in the blood that still flowed freely from his nose.

(He wondered if it was broken. It would be the third time Neil broke his nose.)

The creak of hinges made him stand and spin around, tensing. Max stumbled towards him, the door slamming behind her. She stopped a foot in front of him. Her lip trembled. Her eyes were red rimmed.

“Where are you going?” Her voice cracked.

“I don’t know.” Anger rose in his chest, irrational anger at Max. He stalked to his Camaro, throwing the door open and climbing in.

The passenger door creaked open and Max jumped in. Hands trembling, she buckled herself.

“Get the fuck out,” Billy spat. He rounded on Max. Her blue eyes were wide, full of tears. She shook her head.

“Max,” Billy growled, warningly.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please, Billy.”

Something familiar flashed in her eyes: that fear, that terror. Billy felt his anger burning away, leaving space for all his hopelessness and self-hatred to take root. He felt so tired all of a sudden; he couldn’t find the energy to tell Max she shouldn’t be afraid, that Neil’s anger was only ever spent on Billy.

He faced forward, fishing his keys out of his pocket and starting the car. He hit the gas, wheels spitting gravel, and sped off into the night.

After several silent minutes, the only sound of the wheels against the road, the hum of the engine, Max reached into her pocket, pulling out a wad of tissues and passing them to Billy.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

“Is it broken?” she asked, concern bleeding into her words.

“Nah.” Billy felt it gingerly. It hurt like hell - so did the rest of his body - but it didn’t hurt that bad. He knew what a broken nose felt like.

There was another long pause. Billy kept his eyes on the road, one hand at the top of the wheel, the other holding the clump of kleenex

to his nose.

After a moment, Max cleared her throat. "Billy," she began.

"Don't."

Max blinked back fresh tears and Billy sighed.

"It's ok, Max. I'm used to it. See?" He turned to her, lowering the bloody tissues to smile widely. A trickle of blood slid down from his nose and into his mouth.

"That's not funny," Max whispered, her voice shaking.

"Sorry." Billy watched the road, the mailboxes and houses blurring by as the speedometer climbed towards 50. There was another pause and then -

"And you look insane." Max was looking at him, a little nervously, snot still smeared across her face, but the corner of her mouth pulled up in a half smile.

Billy grinned at her. He reached over to turn the stereo on, falling back against his seat as Led Zeppelin filled the empty space between them.

Led Zeppelin was their happy medium; Max liked it because she could understand the lyrics (she always complained that AC/DC and Motley Crue were too loud, that she couldn't even hear the words) and Billy said he only liked Zeppelin's guitar solos, but he privately had a soft spot for the words, too.

Going to California with an aching in my heart.

They drove like that for what seemed like hours. Billy wasn't really sure, he didn't check the time. He took the highway and traded the small town suburbia houses for billboards and far off blinking city lights.

I think I might be sinking.

Eventually, when his nose stopped bleeding and the blood on his face

had crusted over, he slowed, pulling off the highway and into a tiny gas station at the side of the road. Max had fallen asleep, curled in on herself, her head resting on the hard metal door.

In the tiny convenience store, Billy grabbed a pack of cigs and, after a second thought, a bag of potato chips for Max. At the counter, he dealt with the shocked stare of the girl behind the register at the state of his face by flirting shamelessly, and when she went to give him his change, he leaned over, grinning, and said "Keep it."

Max was awake when Billy slid in the driver's seat, blinking and staring around in confusion.

"Where are we?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. Billy tossed the bag of chips at her. She caught them, tearing the bag open and reaching her small hand inside. She shoved a handful into her mouth and went in for another.

"Dunno." Billy shrugged. He reached over, pushing Max's hand out of the way to steal some chips. He crammed them into his mouth, crunching loudly, swallowing. He pulled a cigarette out of the carton, lit it, and cranked down the window.

Max, mouthful of chips, stared at him. She swallowed with difficulty and went in for another handful. Billy watched her, a strange pang in his heart, a lump rising in his throat. She didn't eat dinner because of him. Chips were a rather poor substitute.

"Where are we going now?" she asked, wiping crumbs from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Home, I guess." Billy glanced at the clock for the first time. It was 9, they'd been gone for two hours. He grimaced, thinking of what his father would do to him when he brought Max home at 11PM on a school night.

The ride back was much of the same, silence other than Robert Plant's voice and the crinkle and crunch of Max slowly plodding through the bag of chips. At one point, halfway home, she set the empty chip bag on the floor, unbuckled, and crawled across the seat, curling up beside Billy and laying her head on his knee, her long red

hair falling over her face, like she was hiding behind a curtain.

Billy stared at her for a long moment, before looking back up at the road, one hand gripping the steering wheel, the other hanging out the open window. He kept his eyes ahead, watching the road signs, even when he felt Max shift, rolling over to lie on her back to look up at him. He kept his eyes ahead, even when tears welled over and rolled down his face. Max didn't say anything when they dropped down from his chin and onto her cheeks, and for that he was thankful.